

American

NEWS & VIEWS

A Weekly Newsletter from Public Affairs, American Embassy

March 14, 2014

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President Obama Says United States Stands with Ukrainian People

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr. | Staff Writer |
13 March 2014

Washington — President Obama says the interests of the United States are in making sure that the Ukrainian people determine their own destiny without the threat of outside influence or force.

“The most pressing challenge that Ukraine faces at the moment ... is the threat to its territorial integrity and its sovereignty,” Obama said during a March 12 meeting at the White House with Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk.

“We have been very clear that we consider the Russian incursion into Crimea outside of its bases to be a violation of international law, of international agreements of which Russia is a signatory, and a violation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine,” Obama added.

Obama emphasized that the United States stands with Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. He also noted that the United States rejects a proposed March 16 referendum to determine Crimea’s future that has been patched together in a few weeks while sizable Russian military forces occupy the Crimean peninsula.

The European Union and the United States have warned the Russian government that the proposed referendum is contrary to the Ukrainian constitution and to international law. Crimean voters will decide March 16 on one of two options: become a separate region and join Russia, or remain in Ukraine but with broader autonomous powers. However, voters will have no option to oppose either of the ballot questions; the status quo will not be an option. Ukraine’s independent news media have characterized the vote as a choice of “yes now or yes later” — immediately joining Crimea to Russia or declaring independence before later formalizing the bond.

“We will not recognize, certainly, any referendum that goes forward,” Obama said while sitting side by side with Yatsenyuk in the Oval Office. The president said he hoped that, as a consequence of diplomatic efforts led by Secretary of State John Kerry, there will be a rethinking of the actions promoted by Russia and the Crimean parliament.

Kerry is traveling to London for March 14 talks with his Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said. The aim of the meeting is to convince Russia that there is a diplomatic solution to this crisis. Kerry met with Yatsenyuk separately at the State Department on March

12 before the meeting in the Oval Office.

Obama said there is no doubt about the historic ties between Russia and Ukraine, and the Ukrainian government has effectively communicated with the Russian government their desire to resolve this dispute diplomatically over the Crimean region, but that “is not something that can be done with the barrel of a gun pointed at you.”

The leaders of the Group of Seven (G7) advanced economies — Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States — announced March 12 that any referendum for the future of Crimea “would have no legal effect.”

“Given the lack of adequate preparation and the intimidating presence of Russian troops, it would also be a deeply flawed process which would have no moral force,” the G7 leaders said in a statement. “For all these reasons, we would not recognize the outcome.”

The G7 has already announced a suspension of preparatory activities planned for the Group of Eight Summit in Sochi, Russia, later in 2014. Russia is the eighth member of the economic policy group, which includes the members of the G7.

Crimea became the focal point of tensions between Ukraine and Russia when President Viktor Yanukovich left Kyiv for Moscow in February in the aftermath of months of protests and civil strife. Russian military forces wearing ski masks and combat uniforms without markings or insignia began pouring into Crimea, a region in the southeast portion of Ukraine that is bordered by Russia and fronts onto the Black Sea. By treaty agreement, Russia maintains its Black Sea naval fleet in Crimea.

Yatsenyuk, who is serving as head of Ukraine's government in the lead-up to national elections in May, told reporters at the White House that the Ukrainian people’s main concern is their fight for freedom and sovereignty. Yatsenyuk was scheduled to address the United Nations March 13 in New York.

“My country has faced a number of challenges,” he said. “The military one is a key challenge today, and we urge Russia to stick to its international obligations, to pull back its military into barracks, and to start the dialogue with no guns, with no military, with no tanks, but with the diplomacy and political tools.”

Yatsenyuk said that the Ukrainian government is ready for open talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin and his government, and that Ukraine will adhere to all of its international obligations and bilateral and multilateral international treaties.

In a 1994 treaty signed by Ukraine, Russia, the United States and Britain, the latter three nations pledged to guarantee Ukraine's security and never to invade the country. In return Ukraine surrendered its share of the former Soviet Union's stockpile of nuclear weapons to Russia.

Yatsenyuk also noted that Ukraine will sign an agreement within the next several weeks with the European Union, and "we want to be very clear that Ukraine is and will be a part of the Western world." But he added that Ukraine also wants to remain a "good friend and partner of Russia."

At the White House, Obama told reporters that the United States is moving ahead with an assistance package that includes \$1 billion in loan guarantees aimed at helping support Ukrainian energy security. The European Union is preparing its own \$15 billion assistance package for Ukraine, as well as additional financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved the bill to extend political, economic and technical assistance to Ukraine. The House of Representatives has previously approved the plan.

Vice President Biden, who attended the Oval Office meeting with the president and Yatsenyuk, met with the prime minister separately on March 13 at the White House.

Palestinian Economic Initiative Supports Peace Talks

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr. | Staff Writer |
11 March 2014

Washington — Diplomatic agreements can create peace, but what will help the Palestinian people build better lives and livelihoods is a balanced national economy that delivers the benefits of peace, says Assistant Secretary of State Anne Patterson.

"We have seen a great deal of unrest across the Middle East region in recent years that can be attributed, in large part, to the frustration of a very large rising generation of underemployed or unemployed Arab youth," Patterson said. "The economic and social roots of these upheavals are as important as the political ones."

Speaking at an international conference March 8, Patterson said Palestinian young people are connected to the world like no previous generation, and they have the same aspirations for good jobs and better lives. Those aspirations need to be addressed alongside their desire for national independence, she said.

It is crucial for the international community to help

strengthen the Palestinian economy, working to remove obstacles to expanded business and setting forth programs and policies that foster business expansion, which includes providing education that equips young men and women with marketable 21st-century skills, Patterson said.

Patterson, who is the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern and North African affairs, joined 100 participants from the region and from business groups attending a conference on the Initiative for the Palestinian Economy in Prague March 8-9. The initiative is a multiyear plan under the leadership of Tony Blair as the representative of the Middle East Quartet (United Nations, European Union, United States, Russia). The initiative supports the renewed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations led by Secretary of State John Kerry, according to the Quartet Representative's Office.

"The initiative focuses on catalyzing private sector-led growth in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem," the representative's office says.

The initiative is focused on eight sectors that are best suited for economic growth in the Palestinian areas: agriculture, construction, tourism, information and communication technology, light manufacturing, building materials, energy and water. The Quartet Representative's Office is working with the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government to implement the initiative.

Patterson told the conference that the current Israeli-Palestinian negotiations are at an important and intensive juncture, and "they offer the best opportunity in years to move toward a just and lasting peace between the Israeli and the Palestinian people."

Patterson said it is time for the region to break away from the models of the past that looked to governments to provide needed investments, and instead to support the building of a private sector to take on those duties.

"Governments simply do not have sufficient resources to address all of the Palestinian people's social or infrastructure needs," she said. "Although the international community has done much over the years to sustain the Palestinian people, the ability of donors to provide assistance or loans to make up their huge development gaps cannot be sustained."

"We intend to attract billions of dollars of new private-sector investment to the Palestinian economy over the coming years," Patterson said.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with President Obama March 3 at the White House to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, and Obama will meet

with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on March 17, also in the Oval Office at the White House.

Gender Equality Vital to Prosperity, State's Russell Says

By Jane Morse | Staff Writer | 11 March 2014

Washington — Helping women around the world access decent-paying jobs would increase economic prosperity for all, says Catherine Russell, the U.S. Department of State's ambassador-at-large for global women's issues.

Russell spoke February 20 at the launch of the World Bank's Gender at Work report, which she lauded as providing "a comprehensive road map" for encouraging women's economic empowerment.

According to Russell, in the second half of the 20th century, the entry of women into the workforce propelled substantial growth for most of the world's developed economies. In the United States, for example, women now own 30 percent of small businesses, generating \$1.2 trillion a year in sales.

In Europe, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that the narrowing gap between male and female employment accounted for a quarter of the continent's annual growth in gross domestic product (GDP) over the past two decades, Russell said. And in Latin America and the Caribbean, the World Bank found that poverty would have been 30 percent higher in 2010 without female contributions.

The World Bank report found that despite accumulating evidence that economic empowerment benefits women, families, businesses and communities, women's labor force participation has stagnated over the past 30 years, dropping from 57 to 55 percent globally.

Women worldwide, according to Russell, represent nearly 60 percent of all unpaid work and half of all employment in the informal sector. "This means," she said, "they are less likely to be protected by existing labor law, to be able to organize or negotiate higher wages, and to benefit from social protection schemes."

The report also notes that women in many countries are constrained by lack of mobility, lack of skills, and exposure to violence.

Russell said the World Bank report on gender equality in the workforce is important because "it looks at ways to level the playing field through government action, and takes into account the lifecycle of a woman — from childhood to productive age to the elder years — in long-term policy planning."

In addition, the report looks at steps the private sector can take through proactive leadership and innovation, Russell said. "With the private sector supplying the largest number of formal-sector jobs in most countries," she said, "the importance of making gender equality, along with respect for the full range of rights at work, a priority throughout internal and external business operations is crucial."

Russell said Secretary of State John Kerry has made economic empowerment a centerpiece of American foreign policy. She noted the many initiatives the Obama administration has launched to help women and girls. Some examples are:

- The Equal Futures Partnership, a multilateral initiative now with 25 member countries committed to legal, regulatory and policy reforms to ensure women fully participate in public life and benefit from economic opportunities.
- Tech Girls, which provides technical training to aspiring computer scientists in the Middle East.
- The Fortune Global Women's Mentoring Partnership for women business executives.
- Women Entrepreneurs in the Americas, aimed at providing training, mentorship and access to financial services for women-owned small and medium enterprises.
- African Women's Entrepreneurship Program, which empowers African women entrepreneurs by expanding opportunities for exports and U.S. investment in sub-Saharan Africa.

"Achieving shared global prosperity is only possible if — and this is a big if — if we make dramatic progress in reducing gender gaps in the world of work," Russell said.

"Our shared economic potential is bright, but in order to achieve it, we need to encourage, cultivate and harness the untapped talent and productivity of women across the globe. It must happen in every country and on every continent," she said.

China Eager to Expand Free Trade, U.S. Official Says

By Sonya Weakley | Staff Writer | 07 March 2014

Washington — Realizing the vision of a free trade area in the Asia-Pacific region was among the priorities emerging from the first of several Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meetings to be held in China this year.

"Our Chinese hosts are very interested this year in trying

to come up with a vision for FTAAP — the Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific,” Robert Wang, the U.S. senior official for Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, said in a March 5 briefing for foreign journalists.

He said a working group was established at APEC’s first Senior Officials Meeting February 27–28 to begin to “discuss and understand what an FTAAP could be.” He added that China “would like to start the process in Beijing at the end of the year.”

Formally proposed in 2006, the FTAAP would create a free trade zone to expand commerce and economic growth in the region. Wang said the working group will make its recommendations at the Economic Leaders’ Meeting, involving leaders from APEC’s 21 member economies November 10–11.

The FTAAP also would help to bring structure to the 75 trade agreements in the region by clarifying “what are they, how do they coexist with each other — and then deciding where to move after that to try to arrive at something that’s more coherent, maybe, across the board,” Wang said.

The gathering of senior officials, usually trade representatives, is held three or four times a year to focus on developing new initiatives. Wang said a number of proposals emerged from the meeting.

Among U.S. priorities was the promotion of anti-corruption programs. “We think that to sustain development in a fair way, as well as in a more predictable way and a more transparent way, we need to have the APEC economies take more action to try to fight corruption, bribery and money laundering,” Wang said.

Other member proposals included “trying to open up the services market” by encouraging members to “be more open to having foreign companies ... technology or others, come into their market to [provide] services.”

Expanding beyond goods into services would enable countries to take advantage of investment potential of larger economies. “For example, in the United States, some 70 to 80 percent of our [gross domestic product] is actually in services, not in goods. And the more developed economies all have the same pattern.”

China called for expanding the existing Information Technology Agreement (ITA) to increase trade of technology products among APEC members. The expansion would include “hundreds and hundreds of new products ... [and] would allow the tariffs for these products to be dropped sharply.”

“The best thing would be to complete the ITA expansion

sometime this year,” he added.

Several proposals focused on urbanization, such as “how we promote more efficient cities, cleaner cities, how we manage population flow, how we design cities. ... [This] would be helpful to a lot of the APEC economies that are rapidly urbanizing.”

The U.S. and China agreed to conduct reviews of members’ use of fossil fuels, and the extent to which their policies discourage the development of sustainable energy sources by “subsidizing the use of fossil fuel, either consumption or production of fossil fuels.”

As host country, China set the themes for the meeting. They were “Advancing Regional Economic Integration,” “Promoting Innovative Development, Economic Reform and Growth” and “Strengthening Comprehensive Connectivity and Infrastructure Development.”

Health Experts Gear Up Global Vaccine Plan

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer | 07 March 2014

Washington — Hundreds of millions of people worldwide get sexually transmitted infections (STIs) each year, and in many cases, their chances of becoming infected with HIV increase as a consequence. An original infection could also escalate into other health problems related to childbirth, infertility, difficult pregnancy or other conditions.

U.S. and international health experts are joining forces to chart a scientific agenda and build political will and resources to develop vaccines that could prevent STIs that have some of the most difficult long-term consequences: herpes simplex virus (HSV), chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis and trichomoniasis, an infection of the urogenital tract.

“Widespread immunization with safe and effective vaccines could revolutionize the way we tackle STIs,” said Dr. Jean-Marie Okwo-Bele, director of immunization, vaccines and biologicals at the World Health Organization (WHO).

In a special edition of the publication *Vaccine*, this coalition of specialists from WHO, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) and other European agencies outlines a “road map” — a systematic plan — to STI vaccine development.

The road map emerges from a “technical consultation” among scientific experts convened by WHO in April 2013. They looked at the current state of development for STI vaccines and sketched out ways to ensure their future availability.

The effort stems from the Global Vaccine Action Plan endorsed by the more than 190 member nations of the World Health Assembly in 2012. The plan sets a 2020 goal to bring out new and improved vaccines and related technologies. The global plan is also devoted to strengthening routine immunization and improving control of diseases well-known to be preventable with vigorous immunization campaigns, notably polio.

Experts participating in the consultation say work in basic science, epidemiology, clinical research and public health planning is required before laboratories can create useful vaccines suitable for broad public use. The effort requires better data on the prevalence and incidence of these diseases, especially as they occur in low- and middle-income countries, according to the plan summary published in *Vaccine*.

Science also needs to develop a better understanding of “the burden of infection-related disease sequelae,” that is, the long-term health consequences and complications that result from STIs. All five of the targeted STIs are associated with increased rates of transmission and acquisition of HIV, for example, but medical science needs more information about how readily and frequently these occur. Infertility, ectopic pregnancy, preterm labor and other pregnancy complications can be related to various STIs. The plan also calls for better data on the progression of these problems and how to diagnose them.

STI complications and consequences have a cost beyond the health of an individual, so the plan will also aim to learn more about the personal and social costs of these health problems: how they affect individual productivity, family incomes or community vitality.

The thorough, painstaking basic science research required to produce an effective vaccine is also a huge task ahead, according to the road map summary, involving many steps. Identifying just the right substance that will trigger the body’s immune response — the antigen — is a huge step, and one that will be different for each of the targeted STIs.

Conducting the basic field studies — first in animals and then among real people — is another critical process in vaccine development. Then researchers still have to evaluate whether a particular vaccine candidate not only works against the disease, but whether it can actually work in the community, which involves factors like cost and delivery.

The initiative is rooted in the principle that overcoming those obstacles is “an achievable goal,” according to an editorial in *Vaccine*.

“Two existing vaccines, against hepatitis B virus and human papillomavirus (HPV) have shown that it is possible to develop safe and effective vaccines against STIs,” the editorial said.

With an estimated 1 million or more people contracting a new STI every day, the technical consultation group concludes it is vital that new measures be found to prevent these diseases and their “often devastating reproductive health consequences.”

Vaccine development and distribution have long been U.S. goals in improving public health, with lifesaving results. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that a global initiative to broaden availability of the measles-rubella vaccine has averted 10 million deaths in a decade and reduced child deaths by 71 percent.

(This is a product of the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov>)